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# A Eurasian Hunting Ritual\*

by JOHN ANDREW BOYLE

IT is recorded by the Persian historian Rashīd ad-Dīn<sup>1</sup> that when Genghis Khan was returning from his campaign in Western Asia he was met, in what is now the borderland between Sinkiang and Kazakhstan, by two of his grandsons, Qubilai and Hülegü, the future founders of dynasties in China and Persia and then respectively 11 and 9 years of age. It so happened that about this time Qubilai shot a hare and Hülegü a wild goat in a place with the Mongol name of Imān-Hoi or 'Goat Wood' near the town of Emil, i.e. in the region of the present-day Chuguchak. It was the Mongol custom, Rashīd ad-Dīn goes on to say, when a child had taken part in his first hunt, to smear some of the animal's flesh and fat upon his thumb; and in the present case the ceremony was performed by Genghis Khan in person. For this initiation rite Rashīd ad-Dīn uses the term *yaghlamishī*, a word derived from the Turkish *yaghla-* 'to grease', which we can perhaps translate by 'anointing' or 'unction'. Elsewhere<sup>2</sup> in his history Rashīd ad-Dīn records another instance of this ceremony. Early in 1280, Hülegü's great grandson, Ghazan, then only 8 years of age, had accompanied his grandfather, the Il-Khan Abaqa, and his father, Prince Arghun, on a hunting expedition into the mountains between Samnan and Damghan in Eastern Persia, and it was here that he made his first kill. To

\* The following is a revised version of a paper entitled 'A Mongol Hunting Ritual' which was read at the 8th meeting of the Permanent International Altaistic Conference at Schloss Auel in 1965 and afterwards published in *Asiatische Forschungen*, Vol. 26 ('Die Jagd bei den altaischen Völkern'), Wiesbaden, 1968. For permission to republish it in this form I am indebted to the courtesy of the editor, Professor Walther Heissig, Director of the Seminar für Sprach- und Kulturwissenschaft Zentralasiens of the University of Bonn, and the publishers, Messrs. Otto Harrassowitz of Wiesbaden.

<sup>1</sup> *Sbornik letopisei*, I/1, transl. O. Smirnova (Moscow-Leningrad., 1952) pp. 229-30.

<sup>2</sup> *Dzhami-āt-Tāvarikh*, III, ed. A. A. Alizade, transl. A. K. Arends (Baku, 1957), p. 143. In the Persian original the word for 'thumb' is *angusht-i buzurg*, lit. 'big finger', which can also mean 'middle finger'. I had adopted the latter rendering in the earlier version of this paper, but 'thumb' is obviously right.

perform the ceremony of *yaghlamishi* the party stayed for three days in Damghan, feasting and making merry and the actual rite of greasing the thumb was carried out by one Qorchi Buqa, who was a *mergen*, i.e. 'a good shot', on the assumption, presumably, that some of his skill would be transmitted to the young hunter.

This Mongol initiation rite reminds one of the British custom known as 'blooding', most familiar from the fox-hunt, but observed in other forms of hunting also and still very much alive. Thus in the *Daily Express* for the 24 September 1962,<sup>3</sup> the columnist William Hickey speculates on whether Prince Charles, then 13 years of age, was blooded when, out with his father, he shot his first stag: 'Deeside locals say the normal custom is for a handkerchief to be dipped in the blood of the stag and then dabbed on the forehead of the victorious hunter. Charles was dutifully blooded 20 months ago on another sporting "first" — a woodcock he bagged at Sandringham — so it seems probable that the formalities were observed'. In the case of the fox-hunt it is the child's cheeks, not his forehead, that are smeared with the animal's blood, which it is or was considered unlucky to wipe off until one reached home. Boys were formerly eligible for the ceremony only till about 14, while girls might be blooded up to 16 or 17; but today there seems to be no age-limit. In the case of the first game bird killed on the wing the procedure was, according to one authority,<sup>4</sup> as follows: 'The grouse, partridge or pheasant's skull was crushed by the officiating adult between his teeth. (This is still the classical method of killing wounded birds). The mixture of blood and brains was smeared over the cheeks and across the forehead of the young sportsman with an appropriate brief oration to the effect that the boy was, from that moment a "full-blooded game shot." In otter-hunting, finally, the practice is or was to mark 'a boy or girl on the brow and cheeks with a small piece of otter's flesh to "enter" him or her to the sport'.<sup>5</sup> Here we would seem to have the closest analogy to the Mongol ceremony as described by Rashīd ad-Dīn.

There are two curious circumstances about this hunting ritual.

<sup>3</sup> For this reference I am indebted to the kindness of Mr Peter Opie, who also drew my attention to the paper by Leslie F. Newman cited below (see the following note).

<sup>4</sup> Leslie F. Newman, 'Notes on Some Rural and Trade Initiation Ceremonies in the Eastern Counties,' *Folk-Lore*, 51 (1940) pp. 32-42 (p. 41).

<sup>5</sup> J. Fairfax-Blakeborough, *Notes and Queries*, CLVIII (1930), p. 175.

The first is that I have been unable to trace the practice further back than the 19th century. The earliest literary reference appears to be in *Handley Cross* by the sporting novelist R. S. Surtees (1803–1864). John Jorrocks, the grocer turned huntsman, on the occasion of his first kill, performs the ceremony on his Cockney whipper-in, a lad described elsewhere as being ‘any age from eight to eighteen’.<sup>6</sup> The practice was evidently perfectly familiar to Surtees’s readers, but one would like to have evidence of its existence in earlier times. Perhaps it then went by another name, for ‘blooding’ is not recorded in this sense in the *O.E.D.* The other curious fact is that, as far as I have been able to ascertain, the custom is totally unknown in Western Europe, certainly in France, Germany and Hungary.<sup>7</sup> The explanation is perhaps that the ceremonial hunt, as we know it in Great Britain, is no longer practised in these countries and that the tradition has therefore been lost. That the ritual was observed in Tsarist Russia I have on the authority of the late Colonel Paul Rodzianko,<sup>8</sup> the celebrated horseman, who remembered himself having been blooded when he shot his first bird, presumably on his family’s estate in the Ukraine. A form of blooding more closely resembling the Mongol custom is reported from the Caucasus area. J. F. Baddeley in his *Rugged Flanks of Caucasus*<sup>9</sup> quotes a Russian writer on the Ossetes as saying that when a gentleman of Sba in Southern Ossetia ‘went shooting for the first time in his life and

<sup>6</sup> See the 1926 ed., pp. 292 and 62. For this reference I am indebted to Mr Michael Mason, the author of *The Arctic Forests*, consulted on my behalf by Mr W. E. D. Allen. In the same letter to Mr Allen he writes: ‘As far as Eskimos and North American Indians, I have never seen such a thing [i.e. blooding] done at all when I was among them. In fact such a practice would be contrary to their natural common sense in a climate where wet blood would have a tendency to freeze in the winter and attract insects in the summer.’ I am extremely grateful to Mr Allen for his active interest in these researches. He also wrote on my behalf to another friend Mr John Reed, who moves in French sporting circles, to ask him whether blooding was known in France. Having himself made inquiries Mr Reed replied, on the authority of M. Pierre Taton, a retired cavalry officer and manager of the race course at Cannes, that the custom had never existed there — ‘at least not since Wellington kept his pack of fox-hounds at Pau!’

<sup>7</sup> On France see the previous note. There is in Hungary — and in Germany also, as I am informed by Professor W. Heissig — a hunting custom which may have some remote connection with blooding. When a large game animal has been killed, the hunter, no matter what his age, dips a twig or leaf in the blood and sticks it in his hatband, where he is entitled to wear it for the next 24 hours. I am indebted for this information to Mr Stephen Bedö of Budapest.

<sup>8</sup> In a letter dated the 15th October, 1964. He died on Good Friday, 1965. See the obituary in *The Times* for 19th April 1965.

<sup>9</sup> 2 vols, Oxford, 1940.

made his first kill — a thrush — an old man ran up and smeared the boy's index-finger with the blood, evidently with magic intent'.<sup>10</sup> Finally, in the remote Afghan province of Badakhshan the ceremony appears to be identical with the Mongol ritual as described by Rashīd ad-Dīn, the initiate's *thumb* being dipped in the animal's blood by an older hunter.<sup>11</sup>

Wishing to find out whether the custom as practised in the time of Genghis Khan still obtained in present-day Mongolia I approached, through the good offices of Dr C. R. Bawden, Professor S. Jagchid of the University of Taiwan, who supplied me with the following interesting information.<sup>12</sup> In some places in the Juu Uda League — in the northern part of the former Jehol province — the young hunter's weapon — the *degüjüng*, a short stick with an iron ball attached to one end — is smeared with the blood of his victim, usually a hare or fox. In the Chahar region the blood of the animal first killed is rubbed on the muzzle of the hunter's gun under the following conditions: if the gun itself is new, if it is the gun of a novice making his first kill or if it is the first hunt of the season. Sometimes the gun is put into the animal's mouth in order to absorb its last breath. These same practices, Professor Jagchid adds, are found amongst the Torgut in Sinkiang. And he concludes: 'These are all traditions going back to ancient times and similar to what Chinggis did.'

Professor Jagchid sees in the 13th-century custom a particular application of the general practice known as *miliyaqu*, i.e. 'the ritual of anointing new-born children, new dwellings, and other newly perfected objects by smearing them with butter, milk etc. for securing good fortune'.<sup>13</sup> It seems to me, however, that there is one important difference. In the hunting ceremony use was made, not of an ordinary and conventional unguent, but of the actual flesh of the animal killed. The analogy is therefore closer to the practice, amongst Mongol hunters today, of smearing blood on the novice's weapon or to the British custom of smearing it on his cheeks and forehead. Originally, we may assume, the thumb that drew the bow-

<sup>10</sup> I, p. 170.

<sup>11</sup> I owe this information to Dr F. Kussmaul, Curator of the Linden-Museum, Stuttgart.

<sup>12</sup> In a letter to Dr Bawden dated the 16th January, 1965.

<sup>13</sup> Ferdinand D. Lessing, *Mongolian-English Dictionary* (Berkeley and Los Angeles, 1960), s.v. MILAFA.

string, and later (as in 19th-century Ossetia) the finger that pressed the trigger, was daubed with the victim's blood, and there were supposed to pass into the initiate's hand both the virtue inherent in the blood and the skill or fortune of the experienced hunter who performed the ceremony. The British custom of smearing the face is perhaps due to contamination with another primitive usage. The ancient Irish, according to Solinus, a 3rd-century writer, used to drain the blood of their dead enemies and smear their faces with it.<sup>14</sup> And the same practice has been attributed to the Smertae, a tribe in Scotland mentioned by Ptolemy, as a possible explanation of their name ('Smeared Folk').<sup>15</sup>

It is strange that these initiation rites should have received so little attention. Hardly anything has been written on the British practice of 'blooding', and no attempt seems to have been made to trace it back to medieval times or to seek evidence of its former existence in other parts of Western Europe. With respect to the peoples of Northern Asia we are even worse informed. Neither Harva<sup>16</sup> nor Mme. Lot-Falck<sup>17</sup> makes any mention of such a ceremony, and yet it is in the forests of Siberia that we should expect to find the ritual in its most primitive and original form. Here, one feels, is a subject on which both the ethnologist and the folklorist could produce interesting and important work.

<sup>14</sup> xxii, 3: Sanguine interemptorum hausto prius victores vultus suos oblimunt.

<sup>15</sup> See William J. Watson, *History of the Celtic Place-Names of Scotland*, (Edinburgh and London, 1926), pp. 17-18.

<sup>16</sup> Uno Harva, *Die religiösen Vorstellungen der altaischen Völker* (Helsinki, 1938).

<sup>17</sup> Eveline Lot-Falck, *Les Rites de chasse chez les peuples sibériens* (Paris, 1953).